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SUBJECT: VISIT TO FRANCE'S FIRST (AND ONLY) MUSLIM HIGH SCHOOL

1. (SBU) In an effort to widen Embassy outreach to Muslim communities throughout France, Poloff and Consul Lille recently visited the "Lycee Averroes," the first and only Muslim high school in France, co-located in the grounds of the Grand Mosque of Lille. We had a friendly, hour-long meeting with the school's director, Sylvie Taleb, who offered impressions on the school's progress and challenges since its founding in 2003.

2. (SBU) The school, now in its second academic year, numbers 45 students, a jump from its first year enrollment of just 15. Lycee Averroes operates as a sort of state-sanctioned private charter school, and faces a five-year probation period, during which it receives no government funding. (After the probationary period, if the school can demonstrate that it meets acceptable academic standards, it will be eligible, as a private "contract" school, to receive government funding to subsidize salaries for teachers.) Taleb reported that a number of the school's teachers work on a voluntary basis, and the school relies on charitable donations and tuition charges to stay afloat. Taleb said she was seeking to move the school to a larger facility prior to the end of the probationary period; based on demand, she claimed, the student body could surpass 200 students, but due to space limitations in the mosque facility, it cannot accommodate more than the current enrollment. She added that similar, unrelated projects for establishing Muslim private schools were under discussion in Marseille, Lyon and Grenoble.

3. (SBU) Taleb stressed from the outset that the school, which follows the French national curriculum, is open to students of all religious faiths and backgrounds, though the current student body is almost entirely Muslim (two students are non-Muslim) and primarily of North African origin. The school is co-ed, but she conceded that the main impetus for the school was to provide education to girls who had been expelled from French public schools for refusing to remove their headscarves in school. (All of the students we saw were female and veiled, as was Taleb.) Taleb reported that the expulsion of girls from local schools for wearing the headscarf dated back to the 1990's and that the mosque had long provided a space for informal schooling for such students, although in much smaller numbers than today. Taleb dismissed the assessment, widespread in the French press, that the GoF implementation of the headscarf ban in schools had been a success, with relatively few expulsion cases. She asserted, without providing statistics, that several girls had been expelled in the Lille area. (Note: The GoF estimates that 47 girls have been expelled this school year for refusing to remove the headscarf, a figure which does not include students who withdrew from school to seek private or home schooling prior to the academic year. End note). Asked about the prevalence of anti-Muslim sentiment locally, she quipped, "wear a veil around town for a day, and you'll know what Islamophobia is." At the same time, she conceded that the neighborhood surrounding the school had been welcoming of the school's presence, as initial public concerns about unruly students overtaking the area had been entirely unfounded.

4. (SBU) Taleb also downplayed the Islamic nature of the school, asserting that she sought to maintain an open-door attitude with the GoF and the local community, in order to dispel any misconceptions that the school is a "madrassa." She stressed that the school follows the French national curriculum, in French, and proudly showed poloff and consul a colorful poster designed by students on baroque art, as an example of the school's typical academic offerings. Unlike many French schools, the school offered courses in Arabic (as well as English), and comparative religion. Taleb stressed that she sought to teach students about Islam, Christianity and Judaism, as many of her students were ignorant of the latter two religions, just as many French Christians knew little about Islam. Taleb commented that she herself had been born Catholic and converted to Islam, and that she spent over 10 years teaching French at a Catholic private school prior to joining the Lycee Averroes. She commented that she was strongly against "sectarianism" and that there should be greater interaction and understanding between France's religious communities.

15. (SBU) Asked what set the Lycee Averroes apart from other French schools, Taleb cited not the religious aspect of the school but the social disadvantages faced by the students. Her goal was to teach the students to overcome the social barriers facing them, maintain the highest academic standards and aim for the upper reaches of French society, to include the "grandes ecoles," French government careers, and financial sector. She described many of her students and their parents as previously unaware of opportunities beyond the typical career tracks offered by French schools to students of immigrant origin, which she summed up as either "work at the Renault factory or tend a vegetable stand." She added that discrimination against students with Arabic-sounding names was widespread, and said she knew of several Arab-origin, post-graduates who were unable to get responses to job openings despite impressive resumes, presumably because they "had the wrong name." Taleb stressed that, in her view, the best response to such discrimination was for students to prove that they could be among the best and use knowledge as a weapon. While the GOF was not helping the school, she conceded, at least it was not standing in her way. She said that the next year of the school's operation would be critical as it would mark the first time the school's students took the national baccalaureate exams; the pass rate for the school would be interpreted as a measure of its success. She added that the fact that the school had taken in a number of students who were under-performing academically would make matters more difficult.

16. (SBU) Poloff and consul closed the discussion by providing Taleb a copy of a French-language, USG-produced magazine on Muslims in the U.S., which she received with interest. Taleb also expressed interest in receiving English-language materials from APP Lille, on subjects of interest such as the U.S. civil rights movement. She commented that the school's students were highly politicized, and in general critical of U.S. policy as they did not see U.S. actions as matching our ideals. She reiterated, at the same time, belief in the importance of dialogue, and said she might be open to hosting U.S. speakers at the school, subject to the approval of the school's management.

17. (SBU) Comment: In visiting this school, we were struck by how U.S. themes of social integration, the immigrant experience, and the civil rights movement offer common ground for Embassy dialogue with the French Muslim community. In many ways, USG interaction and program approaches based on the more general topic of social equality -- i.e., focusing on the immigrant background of most French Muslims -- appear to have greater potential for resonance with French Muslims than focusing only on religion or U.S. policy in the Middle East. End comment.

Leach